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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 003080

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STATE FOR EUR/CARC AND EUR/DAS BRYZA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/12/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: TBILISI ELECTION UPDATE, 12/12/07

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Imedi to Begin Broadcasting on December 12

¶1. (U) Imedi is due to begin broadcasting December 12 with the Kronika program, beginning at 8 p.m. Tbilisi time. The Imedi staff report that one entire control room at Imedi is out of commission and phone and internet access was severely damaged, with only 15 of their former 150 telephone lines currently working. The general director is in London purchasing needed equipment.

¶2. (U) Lewis Robertson, Imedi General Manager and CEO of News Corp Caucasus, said the government has been responsive and reasonable about paying for all of the damage, although some minor details are being worked out. It is expected that the agreement that has been worked out between the Prime Minister and Imedi to pay for all damages will be signed around 5 January. Imedi is still concerned, however, that when it re-applies for its license in April 2008, it will face some challenges.

CEC REPORTS ON ELECTION PREPARATIONS,
CANDIDATE IMMUNITY, BIPARTISANSHIP

¶3. (U) Levan Tarkhnishvili, Chairman of the Central Election Commission, briefed the diplomatic corps in Tbilisi on December 10 in the company of 10 other members of the Commission, including representatives of the opposition parties. Tarkhnishvili said that the CEC's immediate goals are to improve the quality of the voters' list, facilitate credible election day registration for those voters who miss the deadline for adding their names to the voters' list, informing the public about voting procedures, registration of foreign and domestic election observers and the media, and providing election-related information in Armenian and Azeri languages and for disabled and blind voters.

¶4. (U) The CEC is sending canvassers door to door to sign up voters. Voters can check that they are properly registered on the internet, by SMS or in person. Registration closes December 12. After that, voters can register at the polls, but only with presentation of a valid voter registration card. The CEC is sponsoring advertisements that explain voting procedures and tell voters where their home precincts are. After the elections, the CEC intends to publish preliminary results within 48 hours and final results in 3-5 days.

¶5. (U) Asked by a British lawyer whether the government would grant immunity from criminal prosecution to all candidates (which is of special interest to Badri Patarkatsishvili), Tarkhnishvili refused to promise immunity categorically,

saying the decision did not entirely rest with him. (Note: the election law states that a candidate shall not be detained, arrested or searched without the consent of the CEC, but makes no mention of continued investigation or prosecutorial activity not involving arrest or detention. Other Georgian officials have indicated that prosecutions of candidates such as Patarkatsishvili or Shalva Natelashvili would not be halted, although the candidates personally would remain free during the campaign.)

¶6. (U) Asked about the atmosphere within the CEC, which for the first time has members from the major opposition parties, the opposition members said generally they are pleased with their additional seats and that open discussion is the rule. Tarkhnishvili said he was worried about how the system would work, fearing the CEC's work would be overly politicized. However, although there were disagreements, he felt the CEC is "working in a normal way." The Labor Party member agreed with Tarkhnishvili's assessment, but claimed that no opposition party member has been chosen to head any of the 3500 or so Precinct Election Commissions.

MOIA Addresses the Rumor Mill

¶7. (U) Ekaterine Zguladze, Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs (MOIA), sent a letter to Ambassador stating that MOIA has established a special pre-election hotline. In her letter she notes that the objective of this initiative is to address all questions and queries that citizens have with respect to police activities and violations of their authority during pre-election activities. This move was in response to a meeting between Minister of Internal Affairs

TBILISI 00003080 002 OF 002

Merabishvili and ambassadors last week.

¶8. (C) In a separate meeting on December 12 with Poloff, Zguladze said the Acting President has established a council made up of representatives from the different ministries to address pre-election issues with the OSCE/ODIHR Election Monitoring Team in twice weekly meetings. She plans to address the issues of misuse of administrative resources, rumors about opposition members being denied office space in the regions, and rumors of police harassment. She stated that the Georgian Election Code is quite specific about what constitutes misuse. The Government will give the legal basis for its reasoning to the ODIHR team. Zguladze said that the Transparency International Report (released last week) is not factual in this regard and standards other than the Georgian Election Code are not lawful nor applicable. She refuted the claim that opposition parties are being denied office space in the regions by the majority. She said that the specific incident which triggered the complaint was that the opposition party chose office space where the National Movement had already established residency, and an argument ensued over how and where to display the party flags. Zguladze said that the incident snow-balled into something larger afterward. Zguladze said the MOIA is investigating actual instances of criminal abuse, but complained that few have facts upon which to launch an investigation. Poloffs urged the Government to stay in close contact with the ODIHR team and to respond quickly to issues raised, including especially the use of administrative resources and allegations of harassment.

¶9. (C) Separately, Zguladze said the MOIA is investigating approximately 30 policemen for use of excessive force during the November 7 protest and that these investigations should be complete by the end of December. Any findings in these instances would result in administrative actions, such as warnings, suspensions, or fines. She said the Prosecutor's Office is pursuing additional criminal cases against policemen. Of the three policemen who were seriously wounded, one of the stabbing victims most likely will not be

able to return to police work. Poloffs urged the MOIA to conclude the investigations quickly. When asked about MOIA plans for any protests on January 6, she said she knew people were discussing this issue. She worried that any protests on January 6, would put police in the unenviable position of being caught between pro-Saakashvili and pro-opposition supporters.

IDPs' Debts Written Off

¶10. (U) The Georgian government has announced plans to restructure electricity and natural gas debts owned by Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), mostly from Abkhazia, who are living in collective centers. The electricity debt covers the period 1999-March 2007 for those residing in Tbilisi and 1999-July 2007 for those who reside in the regions. The natural gas debt covers the period from 1999-March 2006. The total debt being written off is 50 million GEL.

Presidential Candidates on the Move

¶11. (U) The Presidential candidates are making their presence known in Tbilisi and the regions. Below a recap of their recent activities.

- Saakashvili, National Movement Candidate, held meetings in the ethnic Azeri region of Kvemo Kartli to pledge his support to address social problems in the minority regions.

- Natelashvili Labor Party Candidate, briefed the diplomatic corps on his platform on December 11. He also met with Russian Ambassador Kovlenko. In a separate meeting, Natelashvili promised to return bank deposits bank to voters which they lost after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

- Gachechiladze, United Opposition Candidate, visited the Kakheti region in Eastern Georgia and familiarized locals with his election platform. Gachechiladze has pledged that he will ensure that the Russian embargo is lifted. This is a particularly relevant issue to most in Kakheti, a region where grapes are cultivated and harvested for wine export.

- Gamkrelidze, New Rights Candidate, met with members of the society of the blind and has promised them an exemption from land tax should he be elected.

TEFFT